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Khrushchev, Nikita
P-Louis, Victor
P-Gart, Murray
P-Schecter, Jerrold
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The Great Khrushchev Mystery

"If you close your eyes, listen to what the Chinese are saying about Mao, and substitute 'Comrade Stalin' for 'Comrade Mao,' you'll have some idea of what it was like in our time." So writes the world's most celebrated unperson, former Soviet Premier Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, in the first installment of his collected reminiscences which will appear this week in Life and nineteen foreign magazines and newspapers. As promoted by Life, Khrushchev's recollections constitute a historic document—the first such account by a Soviet leader since Leon Trotsky lifted the Kremlin's veil more than a generation ago. But if the document has stirred worldwide interest, it has set off radiating waves of controversy and speculation as well. For "Khrushchev Remembers," like Churchill's often-quoted description of Russia itself, seems very much a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

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Khrushchev and Stalin: 'Something sick'

The editors of Life are, of course, convinced that they have the real thing. But Khrushchev himself has publicly denied involvement, and there are some Western Soviet specialists who believe him. These experts contend that there is strong evidence pointing to the fact that the whole project was concocted by Soviet intelligence—specifically by the so-called "Disinformation Department" of the KGB—from the vast bulk of the former Premier's statements and writings, and perhaps from taped private conversations as well. Even Life, in an elaborate, 28-page prospectus drawn up to sell "Khrushchev Remembers" to foreign publishers, specifically forbade use of the word "memoir" in connection with the work.

Whether "Khrushchev Remembers" amounts to recollections, reminiscences or just a highly selective Khrushchev sampler, perhaps nothing about the document is more revealing than the story of how it was compiled and transmitted in the first place. Apparently the key figure in the negotiations was a mysterious Russian journalist named Victor Louis, who writes from Moscow for London's Evening News and is widely believed to do frequent chores for the KGB. Louis has served as a secret literary agent before, most notably in a clumsy Russian attempt to undercut the impact in the West of Svetlana Alliluyeva's book, "Twenty Letters to a Friend." This time, Louis (who presumably would not be free to make a deal of such magnitude without express KGB approval) took part or all of the Khrushchev recollections to the elegant Hotel d'Angleterre in Copenhagen during the last week in August. There he met with Murray Gart, chief of the Time-Life News Service, and Jerrold Schecter, Life's Moscow correspondent, to complete the arrangements for the controversial publication.

Translator: To organize the inchoate mass of material (which was code-named "The Jones Project") Life then enlisted a 23-year-old American Rhodes scholar named Strobe Talbott, who is studying at Magdalen College, Oxford. A former chairman of the Yale Daily News, Talbott had worked last year in Life's Moscow bureau. To allay any doubts among potential customers about the volume's authenticity, Life hired British Sovietologist and Khrushchev biographer Edward Crankshaw to assess the contents in a long introduction. His belief in the veracity of the recollections was a clinching argument in Life's sales pitch, yet even Crankshaw admitted: "My own personal decision as to its authenticity had to be based on the evidence of a Russian typescript and nothing else at all." In the event, Life was able to sell the serialization to such prestigious news organizations as The Times of London, France-Soir and Der Stern (which paid $150,000 for the German rights). All in all, it is estimated that Time Inc. stands to gross more than $1 million on the deal.

If Crankshaw managed to submerge his doubts, however, other Western observers have not. "It looks very likely," said one, "that the material they have is a KGB production compiled and issued with Khrushchev's knowledge and permission, from what may be archives or records of what he has said at one time or another, plus, apparently, some tapes of the man himself." But if this is the case, what guarantee can there be that nuances, motives and accounts of events themselves have not been significantly changed from what the author really intended to say?

That question must remain, at least for the time being, unanswered. What can be said with some certainty, however, is that "Khrushchev Remembers" contains few fresh insights. "What is missing," admits Crankshaw, "is any sort of account of the power struggle inside the Kremlin which ended in [Khrushchev's] victory and his subsequent defeat." Instead, the reminiscences flesh out an already well-known portrait of Stalin. "Stalin's rule . . . damaged the fabric of our Soviet society," the serialization begins. "There was unquestionably something sick about Stalin."

Vignettes: There are, in the first installment, some devastating vignettes of Stalin's court. "Once [Stalin] turned to [Nikolai] Bulganin [who later became Soviet Premier] to say something, but couldn't remember his name. Stalin looked at him intensely and said: 'You, there, what's your name?' 'Bulganin,' he answered. 'Of course, Bulganin,' said Stalin, 'that's what I was going to say'." At another point, Khrushchev recalls: "We were leaving Stalin's after dinner one night and Bulganin said, 'You come to Stalin's table as friend, but you never know if you'll go home yourself or if you'll be given a ride to prison'."

In the second installment, which will appear next week, Khrushchev recounts his wartime experiences. At Stalingrad, after the epic Russian triumph, the German dead could not be buried in the frozen ground and the bodies had to be burned. "Napoleon, or someone, said that burning enemy corpses smelled good," Khrushchev recalls. "I don't agree. It was a very unpleasant smell, and altogether a very unpleasant scene."

The Fall: Installment three details Stalin's death and the fall of secret police chief Lavrenti Beria, who was arrested within the Kremlin by other Soviet leaders in one of the most dramatic confrontations in all of Russian political history.

In the final installment (which will appear in a longer version overseas), Khrushchev becomes a paramount figure on the world stage, and his reflections now take on a more cosmopolitan character. "My experiences with [Yugoslav Communist chief Josip Broz] Tito showed me that there are different ways of building socialism," Khrushchev writes. "There is no single model which fits all countries. To think that is just plain stupid." Predictably, Khrushchev has few nice things to say about Mao Tse-tung. "I remember when I came back from China in 1954, I told my comrades: 'Conflict with China is inevitable.' During my visit to Peking Mao and I used to lie around the swimming pool, chatting like the best old friends. But it was all too sickeningly sweet. I was never exactly sure I under-

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